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Delta Stewardship Council hears briefing on dry-year water management

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[From page A3](#) | [Leave Comment](#)

One half of the Delta Plan's co-equal goals, to provide a more reliable water supply for the state, could become even more difficult to achieve if current drought conditions continue into the next year or longer.

At the July 25 meeting of the Delta Stewardship Council (DSC), a panel of experts discussed what near and long-term plans are being considered.

The meeting was held at the Sheraton Grand Hotel in Sacramento, with six of the seven council members attending. Present were Chairman Phil Isenberg, Vice Chairman Randy Fiorini, Don Nottoli, Hank Nordhoff, Gloria Gray, and the newest appointee, former federal court judge Frank Damrell Jr. Damrell was appointed to fill the vacancy created when Felicia Marcus was appointed to the State Water Resources Control Board. Patrick Johnston was absent.

DSC's Coolidge sets the stage

DSC Executive Manager for External Affairs Keith Coolidge reported that 2012 was the driest year since the 1920s, with effects on agencies throughout the state. Even senior water rights holders were put on notice that "we're in a world of hurt."

Statewide view

Department of Water Resources Deputy Director of Water Management Gary Bardini said that following the drought years of 2007-2009, 2011 was a wet year, when the reservoirs were able to be "topped off."

With 2013 being the second dry year in a row, the state is running through its water storage. Whenever storage falls below 70 percent, it is considered a drought. By September, storage is expected to be around 76 percent of average. Groundwater is also dropping across the state. Bardini said it is getting harder to manage for droughts.

"We used to plan for seven-year droughts. Now we plan for two. We've lost ground on reliability, and the greatest effects are on agriculture. There are economic impacts."

We've made significant improvements in recycling, and increased conservation efficiency, he said. Having done that, flexibility has decreased while demand has hardened.

A Central Valley agriculture situation

Westlands Water District provides agricultural water to parts of western Fresno and Kings counties. It contracts for irrigated water from both the Central Valley Project and the State Water Project.

Chief Deputy General Manager Jason Peltier prefaced his remarks by saying, "We fully recognize we fit into a bigger context. We are sensitive to the realities of upstream implications."

Peltier said that Westlands is in a similar position to other water districts from Tracy to Mendota. The area has 1 million acres of farms and (wildlife) refuges, and large and small communities. Statewide, there are 9 million irrigated acres.

A few months ago Westlands began looking at where the district will end up with storage at the end of the year. "It's critical. It's a redline kind of situation." When we get our allocation, we could well have a zero or very low initial

allocation, he said. "We have a crisis on the horizon and we have a duty to our customers and the communities we support to act and be prepared."

In 20 years, Westlands has had three years of full allocations. Other years, the district has received 10, 40 or 60 percent of the contracted water supply.

During years of reduced allocations, the basic responses are fallowing farmland, purchasing water when it is available through the water market, and continuing to overdraft groundwater. "None of these are sustainable long-term," he said. Eighty percent of the district is now using drip irrigation or micro-sprinkling.

He compared today's situation with the 1977 drought and the multi-year drought that ended in 1992. "We're in a very different place," he said. "Shasta is a 4-1/2 million acre-foot reservoir. In 1977 we drew it down to about 700,000 acre feet. Today we have a prescription from National Marine Fisheries Service to do everything possible to not draw it down below 1.7 million acre-feet. So there is a million acre feet of water reserved for temperature control on the Sacramento River that is not accessible for human use."

He said that after 20 years, he believes, "We can see an improvement in our water supply circumstances and not have that come at the cost of the ecosystem or the fisheries."

Peltier observed that in the water community "we are really good at fighting each other." However, "in a time of crisis parties are able to come together with mutual aid and assistance, and try to find ways to lessen problems."

Santa Clara water serves many purposes

The Santa Clara Valley Water District (Santa Clara) provides water supply, flood control and watershed stewardship to 12 retailers (water districts), 15 cities and nearly 2 million people in Santa Clara County, the heart of Silicon Valley.

Cindy Kao, engineer with Santa Clara, said 2013 is a challenging year for her district. In San Jose, January through June has been the driest period on record since 1874.

In average years, Santa Clara imports 55 percent of its water supply. Forty percent of that is conveyed through the Delta. In dry years, the percentage increases. In 2013, 80 percent of Santa Clara's surface water will be imported, and of that 80 percent will pass through the Delta. "We are very dependent on the Delta, especially in dry years, she said."

Santa Clara's storage capacity has been decreased by 30 percent this year. This is due to regulatory restrictions on local reservoirs based on seismic concerns and structural integrity issues in some dams. The carry-over will be about 50,000 acre-feet less than normal.

To compensate, Santa Clara is taking more water from a groundwater bank in Kern County. Since the groundwater bank is downstream from Santa Clara, the water transfers come through the Delta.

At the same time Santa Clara is more dependent on Delta water, it is having difficulty bringing it into the system, due to another byproduct of the dry conditions and regulatory constraints: low storage levels in the San Luis Reservoir. This year the reservoir is projected to drop below 200,000 acre-feet for an extended period. Santa Clara's concern is that the algae that would form would be drawn down into the Pacheco intake, which serves the district, and disrupt water treatment. At one point, the level was projected to be below the Pacheco intake, cutting off Santa Clara's water supplies entirely.

In response, the district has been preloading its biggest local reservoir, Anderson Reservoir, with water from the CVP (Central Valley Project) before water quality problems begin.

Santa Clara is planning to meet future growth demand in the next 20 years solely through conservation and recycling, said Kao. The district plans call for a big investment in indirect potable reuse, and it is in the process of constructing an advanced water treatment plant.

Sacramento Valley concentrates on flexibility

David Guy, president, Northern California Water Association, said that water managers have to provide for a variety of water scenarios. From 1906 to 2011, water supplies in California have altered from very dry to very wet and in between. As a general rule in the Sacramento Valley water managers respond to drought in a mix of four ways: 1) groundwater pumping, 2) neighbor-to-neighbor transfers; 3) internal management, such as recycling; and 4) crop shifting or idling.

Contra Costa operates in the Delta

Contra Costa Water District Director of Public Affairs Marguerite Patil said the service area of her agency overlaps with the legal Delta and operates four intakes in the Delta. All of the agency's supply comes from the Delta, which serves 500,000 people in central and eastern Contra Costa County.

Contra Costa is a Central Valley Project contractor and also has its own water rights associated with the offstream storage called Los Vaqueros Reservoir. High quality water is pumped uphill to the reservoir when it is available, then stored and blended with Delta water during times when it contains higher salinity.

She said outflow is declining rapidly because of the need to try to preserve more water in upstream storage. "What that means to us is that we're seeing water quality decline. The way we measure it is to look at salinity levels, and we're seeing them skyrocket."

Patil said the only thing that saves the situation is that Contra Costa spent about \$120 million to build a new intake on Victoria Canal, called the Middle River Intake.

The district is hopeful that the Middle River intake will provide reasonable salinity levels through the fall, but they anticipate they will do substantially more blending than usual with Los Vaqueros water.

The district has invested about \$1 billion in the last 15 years to improve supply and quality.

Recently Contra Costa spent around \$109 million to expand Los Vaqueros from 100,000 acre feet to 160,000 acre feet. The reservoir has increased storage capacity, but there have not been enough opportunities to fill it with high quality water, so it is now only at 122,000 acre-feet.



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